French quarantine ends for first group repatriated from China

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French authorities on Friday discharged 181 people repatriated from the Chinese city at the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak, after two weeks of quarantine in a seaside resort.

"We're all very happy to return to a normal life," said toy and fireworks importer Charles Germain, 38, as he prepared to leave the resort in Carry-le-Rouet on France's Mediterranean coast.

Relieved and healthy, the group, like others extricated from Wuhan by their governments, was not allowed physical contact with the outside world for the duration of the virus's estimated incubation period.

French officials wanted to be sure that no one among them carried the virus that has so far killed nearly 1,400 people, almost all of them in China, and sickened some 64,000.

With a clean bill of health for all 181, officials decided it was time to let them go.

Germain, from the French territory of New Caledonia, had been visiting Wuhan in China's Hubei province to celebrate the Lunar New Year with the family of his Chinese wife.

With 180 others brought to Carry-le-Rouet on January 31—including three AFP journalists—Germain made his exit Friday through a large, white tent.

There, he finally removed the surgical mask that had been a compulsory accessory for two weeks, and washed his hands with a special sanitising gel.

"The daily mask is a thing of the past," he rejoiced. "We are becoming normal people again, with a guarantee of being totally healthy."

Before their final goodbyes, each member of the group received a certificate stating they were not contagious, said Marc Zyltman, the senior Red Cross official at the site.

'A bit of anxiety'

Once outside, some started making their own way home, others were picked up by loved ones, and some boarded shuttles headed for train stations and airports.

Another 44 people, who arrived at the resort later, have to stay behind for the remainder of their quarantine, as will 113 others at a different centre in nearby Aix-en-Provence.

Agathe Serres, 26, who had been in Wuhan for the past three-and-a-half years to study dolphins, said she had been brought back to France "with just a few items of clothing.

"There is a bit of anxiety to know what will happen next," she said. Since she cannot return to her university for the moment, she will spend some time with her parents in France.

There was similar uncertainty for Vincent Lemarie, a 48-year-old French teacher in Wuhan.

"I do want to go back," he said. "But not under the current

circumstances."

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